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Derrick Tyson is a photographer/poet living in the Atlanta-area. He has exhibited his work Internationally, including the *d&a Gallery* in Tel Aviv, Israel and in ten universities of art in Nanjing, China. His work has also been published in various magazines online and in print, mostly recent in *Slice* magazine. A recent collage was published in the December/January issue of *Poets & Writers* magazine. His poems have also been included in various magazines, most recently in *Interrobang* #5 and #6. Derrick's photography is an experimental blend of the psychological, the human condition and cinematic atmospheres. He works with both digital and film mediums.



Editor/Publisher
Didi Menendez

Confidential
HOT LINE

Amateurs Only

There's New Zip In the Strip
(And the Flesh Is Fresh)

M
sweet
dreaming

quicker than coffee!

The Calls

WILLIAMSTOBB

We left Reno before seven a.m. on a sunny, August morning. I drove a 17-foot U-haul rig, packed to the gills with my family's worldly possessions. My wife, Alison, and our infant daughter, Phoebe, had flown ahead to Wisconsin—a young family returning to its Midwestern roots after a decade-long Western experiment. My dad had agreed to help with the move, and he followed the truck, driving our Buick sedan.

"I'm going to fall back a ways," he called on the walkie talkie. "See what kind of range we're getting. Over." We had a good mile. "Truck looks fine," he said. "Nice and level. Over."

When we came out of the Truckee canyon into the first big flat of the Great Basin, I called back to him: "I'm going to put on my headphones for a while," I said. Pause. Pause.

"Say 'over' when you're done," he came back.

"Why?" I asked. Pause. Wait. Wait. "Why?" I said. "Over," I said.

"Then I know you're done talking. Over," he said.

"Whatever," I said. "I'm not saying 'over.'"

"Can you hear the engine with those headphones on?" he asked.

"I think so," I said.

"Watch your warning lights. These trucks get shit for maintenance. These rental places—half these people have no idea what they're doing and the other half don't care. Morons and druggies, for the most part. Something's libel to start leaking under there, or a belt starts to go, you wanna know about it before the whole damn thing catches fire. Over and out."

You know Lewis & Clark would love a sweet car ride through the west—spitting sunflower seeds, watching the landscape pass in a time-lapse they never imagined. I'd grown to love the sense of geological time I found in Nevada landscapes. To look around and see evidence of millennia inscribed in stone—the place had changed me. Manic episodes and adolescent insecurities had resolved into a calm appreciation of the precious singularity of consciousness within the vastness of history. I hated to leave a place that had so inspired me, but we agreed: we wanted to raise Phoebe closer to our

families. When Alison landed a job at a hospital in Eau Claire, we started packing.

I'd made a mix of sing-able pop tunes from my cd collection and I put on my headphones. I'd also secretly packed a cooler of beer behind the cab seat—one of those Styrofoam jobbies with a lift-off top. Though it wasn't even 8 AM, I decided it was a special occasion, so I cracked one. To Lewis and Clark.

The truck held relatively easily at seventy. I was surprised. The beer went down, the tunes easily drowned out the soft purr of that finely tuned transmission, and my mind settled into the familiar expansiveness I always felt when I crossed the Great Basin—that ancient lake-bottom stretched into north-south mountain ranges and hundred-mile flats, long vistas, mountain ranges stretching into distance.

About an hour in, I took off my phones and picked up the walkie-talkie. A big black cloud of smoke had appeared on the horizon. It stretched from the ground up into the sky, some ways ahead.

"See that cloud of smoke?" I asked.

"Roger, over," said Dad.

"Where'd that come from?" I asked.

"It just showed up. Over."

"Must've been an explosion," I suggested.

"Could be a wild fire. Over."

"Could be," I said. "How far off you suppose it is?" I asked.

"I don't know. Maybe five miles," said Dad.

A green road sign approached—Winnemucca was 20 miles off.

"I bet it's more like twenty," I said.

I couldn't help but watch the cloud. Was it growing? Getting blacker? The highway had been running pretty straight, and the cloud seemed to be a little ways to the right—south of the road. I turned on the AM radio and dialed through wild static and distant signals. I found a country station and left it there, thinking we might catch some local news.

When I looked back up at the cloud, it seemed lighter. I looked again, trying to remember what it had looked like just a moment before. Hadn't it been toxic, dark, festering black, like a great big bad idea just over the next pass? Now it seemed a little wispy—there was space in it, a bit of blue shown through. Was this because we were getting closer, or was the cloud dispersing?

The Calls

WILLIAMSTOBB

"Is it thinning out?" I asked.

"I think so," said Dad.

As we came across the pass—a road cut on the north edge of a mountain range—we got very close to what was left of the cloud. I had to stretch myself forward, over the steering wheel, and look up through the top of the windshield to see traces of light gray still hanging about a mile up. On the ground, the air was completely clear. The road turned slightly to the right, we passed a truck stop, and within five minutes we were clear on past Winnemucca.

Dad called: "it must've been an explosion," he said.

"But why would the smoke just disappear like that?" I asked. "Wouldn't there be a fire?"

"Chemical explosion," said Dad. "Some idiots at a fertilizer factory messing around with shit they don't understand." He paused, but then decided to finish his thought. "I guess you know by now, those places are full of hippies and drop-outs. Over."

One does wonder if the world can be humiliated into better behavior. The dumb asses in Washington. The price of gas. The Arabs. The Jews. The evangelicals. The gays. The women. And you look at what's happening to the farmers—always the farmers. Because you left the farm, and you can't go back and you also can't forget and now your whole life seems like a wrong turn. In private, you talk it all down. In public, you make nice with people so you feel good that people like you and you're a good person. But in private, you talk it all down and at home you make sure there's real butter on the table and the lawn's cut straight. If you start to notice collateral damage—a strange, fading woman spending too much time in the bathroom and a couple of kids in bunk beds inventing new Greek tragedies—you just go out in the garage and fix the car again and wonder why no one thanks you for your efforts.

A country song ended and a voice announced that it was nine o'clock. Time for news from ABC radio.

"The news is on," I called back. "Maybe we'll hear something about it." The top-of-the-hour news, though, was beamed by satellite from New York into the depths of the atmosphere—into outer space, in fact—where the transmission was re-directed back to tens of thousands of receivers here on Earth, which re-

broadcast it into the surrounding air, in the form of radio waves. My rental truck's antenna had me wired into a national, actually international and technically extra-terrestrial news source. There would be no story about the explosion of a farm industries plant that may or may not have occurred 22 minutes ago in Winnemucca, Nevada. Instead, we heard the following:

"Reports from Moscow indicate that a Soviet Nuclear Submarine, the K-141 Kursk, sank during routine exercises, about 100 miles from the port city of Murmansk. We go now to our Moscow bureau, where Janine Finch has the latest details. Janine?"

"Yes, John, the submarine sank to the ocean floor after two explosions. Mechanical failure seems to have caused the explosions, though the nature of that failure is not yet clear. Russian officials report that the craft's nuclear engines were shut down, that no nuclear explosion has occurred, and that there is no danger of one occurring. And John, the most harrowing detail of this accident: an unknown number of Russian seamen have actually survived the incident and are trapped in the craft. Russian sonar indicates that crew members are tapping rescue messages on the inside of the sub."

I was carting everything I owned across an ancient lake bottom, while, at the opposite end of the world, some young men were trapped in a metal tube, in the dark, under 400 feet of water, fighting panic, oxygen waning, their messages passing through the water for miles.

One time, when I was about 14, he insisted that I sweep the garage floor a second time. It was still "grainy." I said it looked clean enough for an asshole, and he said whadjoo say? and I reached for the baseball bat. I reached and grasped and finally knocked over the rakes and hoes. They clattered down, and I fumbled again for the bat, found it, lifted it, and dropped it too. It took him a second to figure out what I'd meant to do, but when he did, he laughed so hard he spit and then sucked saliva back from his jaw.

That first night, we stopped at a Best Western on the northeast edge of the Great Salt Lake. We'd followed the story of the sunken submarine all day long. Over a late dinner at Denny's, I puzzled while Dad reminisced.

The Calls

WILLIAMSTOBB

"What are those Soviets doing out there, anyway?" I asked.

"They're Russians now," he said. "The Soviet Union collapsed."

"Oh yeah," I said.

"When I was in the military, you didn't ask any questions," said Dad. "If you're told to kill, you kill. If you're told to fly, you fly. If you're told to drive the Coke truck, you drive the Coke truck. You know, your sister was born in an Army camp," he said. I nodded. He sniffled really hard. I watched his salt & pepper beard as he turned his face out the window where the truck and car sat next to each other under a parking lot light. "Your mother wanted out of that place so bad, but it was a top notch medical facility. Better than where you were born," he said. I shrugged. He sniffled again, this time into a yawn.

We hit the road again before seven. Near the historic Wasatch settlement, we passed some LDS billboards—uplifting messages printed over soft-hued images of God's glory in sunbeams. Dad came on.

"These Mormons are running the world now. Over."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Fastest growing religion in the world," he said.

"What do they run, though?" I asked. I'd known a lot of Mormon people, and they did mostly seem like confident, well-put-together folks. One Mormon colleague of mine, a twenty-five year old woman who'd moved to Reno from Provo, was on the fast track to controller of casino operations—leap-frogging dozens of older colleagues (myself, for example) in the finance department. She was engaged to be married in the big temple in Salt Lake City. After the wedding, they hoped to conceive their first child right there, inside the temple. She smiled when she said it. One time, she told me her mom kept a sex journal, chronicling her submissions to the master. When she found it, she wasn't disgusted. She found it inspiring, and read the whole thing. I figured she had it made: a culture of economic significance with real sexual caché.

"They run everything," said Dad. "It's all money. There are more lobbyists employed in Salt Lake City than anywhere in the U.S.," he said.

"More than D.C.?" I said.

"Second to D.C.," he said. "They're just powerful. Influential. I read something that said they're running the White House. That's it. Over and

out." We drove through the Mormon mountains. I waited to be stopped by Mormon soldiers at Mormon checkpoints.

The crew of the Kursk was still alive, still tapping, but the rescue mission was floundering. By noon, two attempts had failed. A submersible rescue vessel was to latch onto the hull of the Kursk, creating a pressure seal that would allow the survivors to exit the damaged submarine. But storm-blown seas were causing stability problems as well as poor underwater visibility. How long could the oxygen hold out?

We made Rock Springs and stopped for lunch at a truck stop. Dad pulled in next to me, on the driver's side, and when I stepped down from the truck I saw a pack of menthols on his passenger seat. I'd been wondering if he was smoking. He'd been trying to quit, and Mom's story was that he had quit, but I'd been skeptical all along. Since being forced into retirement, he'd taken to spending a lot of time out in his shop—the corrugated shed where he keeps two John Deere tractors, two old Ford trucks from around 1940, and various other antique or semi-useless implements including several lawn mowers, snow-blowers, and one of those front-loading Bobcats. No one really understood what he was up to out there, but I suspected that he'd been smoking all along. I didn't care if he did. I wasn't one to throw stones—hell, I had a cooler of beer in the cab of my U-haul. And if smoking killed him... well... he'd been arguing against the world for seventy years already—ample time to make his point.

We finished lunch and started heading for the vehicles. I had gassed up the truck, picked out some snacks, dumped a fresh bag of ice into the cooler. I had the beast idling and was just waiting for Dad. When he finally came out of the truck stop, he approached my window, fingering his beard, looking up and away to the left and right. "I've got to make a quick phone call, here," he said. "It'll take me one minute. You go on ahead. I'll catch up." One time, my mom and dad and I had been eating supper at a Country Kitchen. I was about 12. Dad got up to go to the bathroom. Ten minutes later, I started wondering where he was. When I looked around, I saw him talking to the hostess at the cash register. Mom shrugged—like she'd seen it a thousand times. "Your father has a weakness for women in aprons," she said.

The Calls

WILLIAMSTOBB

Whatever he was doing at the truck stop—smoking, phoning, flirting, soliciting—it was fine with me. I rolled out. Or tried to. The lot's truck exit was behind the restaurant, and it was under construction. I got trapped for what seemed like ages but was probably three minutes behind two eighteen wheelers waiting for construction workers to flag them onto the frontage road that led to the I-80 entrance. By the time I made the turn, Dad was done with his "call," and was walking to the car, about fifty yards to my right, with a suspicious looking brown paper bag in his left hand. More smokes? The bag seemed a little large. I watched him walk—a large man, six foot two or so, barrel-chested and well-postured, seventy years old but looking more like fifty-five. What was in the bag? He'd never been a drinker, so I doubted it was a fifth of Jack. Maybe a little truckstop porn? When I was a teenager I regularly perused the stack of Penthouses he kept in the back of his closet.

Assuming I was long gone, Dad rolled down the window and backed out of the parking spot, smoking openly. I sped forward and made it through the yellow light, the load shifting as I braked and turned a little too hard onto the on ramp. It was probably just smokes. Probably, all he'd wanted was to smoke a cigarette in plain sight, among others of his kind.

A minute later, the walkie-talkie cracked on.

"Okay, Bill," he said. "I'm out to the freeway. Over."

"Okay," I said back. He said something else, but his signal faded. I kept driving.

In fact, I drove for more than an hour and didn't hear from him, didn't see him in my side mirrors. Occasionally, I tried the radio, but he never came back. Finally, I pulled off at an exit and watched the stream of cars go by. I waited fifteen minutes, trying the radio periodically, before cracking another beer and moving forward again. I could see a big storm along the horizon—a huge, black anvil, riddled with lightning. I was excited to get a closer look at it, so I went on ahead, with my Dad officially lost.

The storm turned out to be a doozy. As per the travel plan, I exited I-80 and took I-25 south from Cheyenne, heading toward Denver, where I would pick up a large headboard that Alison's uncle had been storing for us. It was two hours out of the way, but that wasn't a big deal on a forty-hour trip. The turn onto I-25 took me right along the

southwestern edge of the storm. While my truck was in and out of light rain, I could see that Cheyenne was getting blitzed. Lightning peppered the fields just a few miles to my left. Loud thunder seemed to echo through the truck—the big metal structure rang like a drum. I turned the radio on just to hear the electricity snap through the atmosphere.

Then I saw the first car in the ditch, and then the second and third and fourth. I slowed down. The shoulder and median were white. Was it snow? In early August? It looked too coarse—the chunks were too big. I thought it might be salt—for the smallest moment, I imagined the comic overturning of a truck-full of water softener pellets. Then I realized that it was, of course, hail. The ditches were full of big piles of good-sized hail, probably six inches deep. The hail had acted like ball bearings on the surface of the highway, spinning cars out of control. Dozens of vehicles, from both directions, lay scattered at every conceivable angle. Drivers emerged into daylight, baffled expressions on their faces.

"Dad, you hear me?" No answer.

The hail must've come down suddenly, in a kind of cloudburst. All the action—the cars spinning everywhere, the booming shouts of thunder and the barrage of frozen stones—must've occurred within a minute or so—so quickly that people hadn't had time to pull to the shoulder. As they ventured tentatively from the safety of their vehicles, I passed easily in my two-ton U-haul, right into sunshine, even as bright bolts continued to snap the sky inside the rusting frames of my side mirrors.

"Dad?"

By the time I met Uncle Dale at the McDonald's in Longmont, reports indicated that the tapping had stopped. In his first public statement on the matter, Russian President Putin insisted that the Russian fleet could still carry out the rescue, though other reports indicated that England, the United States, and Norway all had more advanced submersible vessels. In any case, it was probably too late.

I was short with Dale—I wouldn't even go in for a burger. I quickly loaded the mirror and secured it with straps, padding, and duct tape. I thanked him, and insisted that I had to keep going.

"Where's your dad?" he asked.

"He wanted to cut across through Greeley," I lied. "I'm meeting him in Fort Morgan."

The Calls

WILLIAMSTOBB

I never even slowed down at Fort Morgan. I leveled the truck at seventy and stretched the distance between myself and my father, hearing hourly reports about lost boys who had called and called and never reached anyone. I drove and drove—a man with his life in a metal can, followed somewhere over the plains by his lost, aging father, also in a metal can. From time to time it crossed my mind that he could be crashed somewhere. Spun out. Impacted. Rushed by helicopter. I kept driving.

I thought of him in the shed, the time he'd been out there for hours in the winter with the gas stove running while he heroically replaced a transmission in a January cold snap. Mom sent me out "to see if he was blue," as in, maybe the gas stove's leaking and pop's asphyxiated under the Oldsmobile. I shuffled quickly across the driveway to the shed, in just my clothes and sneakers. I froze in the twenty yards across, and quickly hopped inside. He rolled his dolly out from under the driver's side tire of that big old sedan. His coveralls and face smeared with transmission fluid, he snapped at me: "What the hell are you doing out here without a coat?" I turned around, dashed back through the cold. "He's just fine, Mom."

The sun set in my mirrors and dusk slow-faded the prairie. Headlights came on. I tuned in a ball game, focused on the road. It was after ten o'clock when I finally stopped at a roadhouse bar near North Platte, bought two beers and called Mom from a pay phone outside the restroom.

Dad was fine. Went the wrong way on I-80 for half an hour after lunch. She sounded pleased. I was to call again when I stopped for the night, and Mom would coordinate with Dad.

I carried the beers right out to the truck and started it back up. My back and shoulders ached. My t-shirt felt like an extra layer of sweaty flesh, but I drove about a hundred more miles—longer than I would have, probably, if Dad hadn't been lost. I listened to that overnight call-in show about the paranormal, UFOs, and whatnot. That night's guest was an expert on the rare phenomenon of dead people's voices emerging from telephone static. He played some not-very-persuasive examples and took calls from people whose own relatives and loved ones had come to them with messages from the other side. The general consensus was that you couldn't tell if

the dead were benevolent, or mischievous, or trustworthy in their reports. They had their own agendas, which the living could scarcely understand.

I held the walkie-talkie up near my chin. I set it back down.

Before calling home from a hotel outside Kearney, I heard the 2 AM newscast—the Russians were accepting help from the UK and Norway, but the boys were certainly dead. I slept immediate, black sleep. After a while, I heard a message coming to me in a code I didn't understand. I stood in darkness, made my way across a strange room, opened a door. Outside, a weary man with a gray beard stood in yellow light. A hot engine ticked behind him. He apologized. He stepped into the dark.

A telephone began ringing. It was dark inside the vessel, but a telephone was ringing. We'd been playing hearts down there. One seaman, who had lost his right arm and leg in the explosion, shot the moon. His partners called him Half-of-Ivan and cursed him in a crude way and then a telephone began ringing on the submarine.

"Get the phone," said Ivan. "It's them."

"Who?"

"From above. They're coming to get us." He dropped a card, then another—the Queen of Spades turned upright in front of him. Fluid seeped through the bandages on his shoulder and hip. With just one hand, he could not pick up the cards he'd dropped. He tried to stand, but couldn't push away from the table. "If no one answers, we'll never be rescued!"

"You answer it, Half-of-Ivan. Set down your cards and run to the telephone!"

I pulled back into wakefulness. I felt as if I'd been sleeping for hours, but couldn't be sure. Light from the parking lot yellowed the room. Shadows rippled. It was completely quiet. I picked up the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hello," said the voice back. It was a man.

"Yes?" I said. He seemed to hesitate. Then he laughed and launched in.

"Dean-o!" he shouted. "Dean-o you old slut-banger. I need me some women."

The Calls

WILLIAMSTOBB

"You've reached the wrong number," I said. My dad was snoring lightly in the next bed, and I could hear heavy breathing through the phone, too—too close, too moist. I pictured a man leaning drunkenly against a counter in the kitchen of a nearby crack house.

"Dean-o," he said. "Dean-uh-uh-oh! Oh man," he said. Some rattling. He had dropped the phone and picked it up again. "No women?" he said.

"No," I said. "Wrong number."

"Well," he said. He paused and made a slurping sound. "Fuck you, Dean-o." And then he was gone.

I lay awake for a while. The wind was blowing outside—a shadow swayed and shuddered in a sexual-seeming way, somehow meaningful. I began to see the landscape of the trip from overhead—the cloud of smoke over Winnemucca, the basins and ranges, the spiral of wreckage around the hail storm. I saw Alison and Phoebe sleeping comfortably, their faces touched by moonlight through an open window. And that distant, sunken craft full of quiet boys, all under the same night sky. High above everything—every family, landscape, nation, weather—satellites orbited in total silence, except one satellite, strung with bells, bells that were chiming and chiming again. All the satellites laughed and chimed and chimed and laughed.

"Hello?" I slurred.

"What's the availability of your women?" asked the caller.

"My women?"

"I know it's short notice," he said, "but Dean-o said it would be all right to call tonight. Said you could hook me up for tonight."

"You have the wrong number," I said. "Maybe the wrong room."

"It's what Dean-o said. You know Dean-o, right?"

"I just got this," I mumbled. "They just gave me this room." The streetlight had gone out and it was very hot in the room. A drop of sweat ran from the back of my knee down my calf. I felt deeply confused. I didn't recognize my status.

"Wrong room?," said the caller. "This sucks."

"It's funny," I said. "I have a wife and daughter, so my women definitely aren't available."

"Right," he kind of laughed. His breathing changed a little. "What's your daughter look like?" I didn't believe I was hearing correctly. The line clicked out, so when I spoke, I spoke to no one.

"She's ten weeks old."

I stood, went to the bathroom. Drank water. I fumbled on the dresser to find the card key for the room and the car keys. I stepped outside. The air was not crisp. Not refreshing. It was humid, wet. I was sweating, shirtless, wearing just my underwear. Two trucks crossed the freeway overpass, a quarter mile off. The high-pitched whine of their tires. My breathing, heavy, through my mouth. Dad had parked the car right there next to the truck, right in front of the room, and I stepped to the passenger door and opened it with the key. I reached inside and lifted the brown paper bag from the passenger seat. I put my hand in, found an object, and pulled it out. A carton of menthols. But the bag still held weight. I set the cigarettes on the roof of the car, put my hand back in the bag, and found another object, pulled it out. It was a tractor. A wooden John Deere tractor—yellow lettering across the green engine. A toy. A child's toy, but for what child? A ten-week-old granddaughter? Its wooden wheels turned easily. A wagon came unattached from the back of the tractor and fell to the pavement. I bent, picked it up, brushed it off, re-attached it. I put the tractor and the cigarettes back in the bag, put the bag back on the seat, closed the door.

Back inside the room, Dad was snoring more loudly. In the dark, I found the clothes I had been wearing, still damp, a little rancid. I put them on, found my wallet, my keys, my duffle bag, closed the door quietly behind me. Before I rolled out, I left my walkie-talkie next to the cigarettes and child's tractor in the brown bag on Dad's passenger seat. I would get back on the road and drive, work simply in an environment where time was measured in minutes and distance in miles, and where I knew the many lights shining—fires burning far, far away through deep, black space—were illusions, like echoes of voices silenced long ago.

William Stobb is the author of *Nervous Systems*, a National Poetry Series selection published by Penguin Books, and two forthcoming poetry collections, *Artifact Eleven* (2010, Black Rock Press) and *Vanishing Acts* (2011, Penguin). He works as Associate Professor of English at Viterbo University in La Crosse, Wisconsin.

DANIEL ROMO

An Act of Surrender

The bustylicious blonde swimsuit model who moonlighted as a newscaster
reported it was a carjacking: a desperate man driving a stolen sedan
leading a fleet of police down the 405,
while the helicopter above highlighted the high speed pursuit
as if spotlighting opening night at the Hollywood Bowl.

The Devil Rays were murdering the Angels so I switched to the news
hoping to catch tomorrow's forecast.
That's what it's come to for me—
deciding on shorts or pants, tank top or polo.

I watched cheering him on,
as he weaved through the glowing lanes
like the sirens were merely shrill reminders guiding him
on the expressway to escape.

We weren't so different:
him sweating in bucket seats in a car that's not his,
me slouched into a La-Z-Boy in a life that's not really mine.

Part of me rooted for him to race far away from the chase,
from the media,
from this place into a world where the echoes of broken speed limits
ring like casual conversation.

The other part wanted to see him plow head-on into another car
jump out the window
reach for a gun
engage in a shootout
with blood and brains and guts
spilling all over the freeway
so I could be reminded of what it means

to be real.

But I didn't want to be let down yet again,
so I changed the channel back to the ballgame—
where men in uniform follow rules enforced
by other men in uniform.

Because it usually ends that way:
the criminal slowly coming to a stop and getting out,
his conceding hands in the air,
his defeated face
confiding in the ground.

Daniel Romo's recent poems can be found in Pemmican, Poetry Superhighway, and red lion sq. He is an MFA candidate at Antioch University. He lives in Long Beach, CA and is looking for a publisher for his first book of poetry.

TERRY LUCAS

When God Moved Out

At first, he visited the children
every weekend: they'd sleep over
in the small chapel he'd taken on the corner
across from The Divine Hand Palm Reading Parlor.

He bathed them in the baptistery beneath
a mural of olive trees on the banks of the River
Jordan, calling down from his study to stop
splashing while he was answering

evening prayers. Later he'd descend,
tell bedtime stories replete with apocryphal
animal friends, tuck them into sheepskin
pallets he'd made to cushion the whorled-grained pews.

Sundays he'd take them to the movies, slip
into a vacant theater, create something new
on the big screen, or maybe show reruns
of the great flood, the dinosaur extinction.

On the Sabbath, of course, God would rest
at the beach in a chaise lounge, call up dolphins
as playmates for the children, periodically check in
with the new girlfriend on his cell phone.

After the divorce was final, he'd come around
only once or twice a year—Christmas, Easter—
but he was always there in spirit:
the weddings, christenings—lurking
in the corners of their dreams
of eternal punishment.

Terry Lucas was born in the Midwest, grew up in New Mexico and has lived in the San Francisco bay area for several years. Three times nominated for a Pushcart Prize, Terry's work has been previously published in *MiPO*, *Poets & Artists (O&S)*, and *OCHO*, as well as recently in *Green Mountains Review*, *OVS* and *Tygerburning Literary Journal*. He received his poetry MFA from New England College in 2008, and is an assistant editor for *Fifth Wednesday Journal*.

Carnivore

I've seen a man wild

straining his neck for food,
cleaning the stretches
of flesh between knuckles.
We rub shoulder blades
against one another

like flint for warmth,
or maybe from aggression.

Each migration is hostile
and loving in its undertaking
so we consume out of necessity—
a mutual predation.

The moment in which I think

I'm not fit for this

I find my fingers reach
for the piece of hide
caught in my teeth.

All is at stake. The foraging, the sex,
the tending, and the cycle.

I will lick the dirt behind your ears.
I'm of your breed, lifting your hair.

Caitlin Mackenzie was born and raised in the suburbs of Detroit. She now lives in Grand Rapids, Michigan, working as a publicist in the academic book publishing field. She is currently a MFA student in the Bennington College Writing Seminars. Her work has been previously published in *The Other Journal* and *Breadcrumb Scabs*.

For the rain between us, sheets

I see nothing new
in the whole of this country; bitter threads
pull at my edge;

a larynx & throat-sound
that you find beautiful, there

for the life

distract a prelude; you there,
& for good reason,

unhappiness strikes; more often than not,
it has a still heart, there

& stillborn,

how low the morning, sun
butters your shoulder-lengths,

milk-heavy breasts,

To be entertained, in such release

months from now, the sounds
of birds, particular

, aghast; the oldest mention
of a village

I want nothing from you now
but faith; a question

of degrees

was humming a tune for emptiness
, it knows you

last night's full moon; betrayed
a threesome, reduced

to two; the ghosts of Preston Street

a row of pebbles, designed
to purely fail

, of basement-rattling chains

Born in Ottawa, Canada's glorious capital city, rob mcLennan currently lives in Ottawa. The author of more than twenty trade books of poetry, fiction and non-fiction, his most recent titles are the poetry collections *Glengarry* (2011), *wild horses* (2010) and *kate street* (2010) and a second novel, *missing persons* (2009). An editor and publisher, he runs above/ground press, Chaudiere Books (with Jennifer Mulligan), The Garneau Review (ottwater.com/garneaureview), *seventeen seconds: a journal of poetry and poetics* (ottwater.com/seventeenseconds) and the Ottawa poetry pdf annual *ottawater* (ottwater.com). He spent the 2007-8 academic year in Edmonton as writer-in-residence at the University of Alberta, and expects to spend much of the next year in Toronto. He regularly posts reviews, essays, interviews and other notices at robmcLennan.blogspot.com

JOSHUA GRAY

Cells, Weightless

Short, small, anemic or so
he looked; he ate well, though, chained
his nose to his ear,
blared Heavy Metal and told
many tall tales
of his band Firestarter
and his white magic girl
who thanked him in her
CD booklet, he spent
hours every night talking
to no one but
a dial tone trying
to prove his point.

Once he returned
he'd get high
on butane fuel which was
intense and quick and freakish
and then he'd set
the wall afire and laugh
as flames expired untraced;
he was high
that night he wandered
campus wildly, passed
me and just
collapsed mid-stride, lifeless.

Joshua Gray lives outside Washington DC with his wife and two sons, and works in the city as a director of operations. In his blog *Poembuster* he analyzes poems (technical or thematic) that speak to him; he also describes the sympoe, a poetry form he created. His work has been found in *The Iconoclast*, *Chaffin Journal*, *Blind Man's Rainbow*, *Tar Wolf Review*, *MO: Writings from the River*, and others. He is currently polishing two chapbooks and one book of poetry.



live free, cut well by Derrick Tyson

Larry, Tim, Peter, Saul, William, Carl, Lee, Jake, Richard, Sam, Eliot, Macy, Lucy, Jane, Mary, Jean, Elizabeth, May, Wendy, Lilly, Fanny and Viv all live in Subburnabla and they are very, very happy. They work Monday to Friday and love their jobs. They drive to the catch the train. The train takes them peacefully into the city. Some read, some daydream, some sleep. They meet for lunch; they talk about work, about the news, about the weather. Some work in the same office. They meet on the platform and wait for the train home together. Some yawn, some talk about their day, some are excited about getting home. On the train some sit in silence, others laugh, some make plans to have a quick drink at the local bar. Larry, Tim, Peter, Saul, William, Carl, Lee, Jake, Richard, Sam and Eliot after church go to breakfast with Macy, Lucy, Jane, Mary, Jean, Elizabeth, May, Wendy, Lilly, Fanny and Viv.

On the weekends their white shirts dry in the midday sun. Their dogs dig holes and bury the bones they were presented with for being good dogs. They shower to the sound of blenders mixing fruit. They shave to the sizzle of bacon. They run, stretch, play ball. On the weekends they enjoy barbecues and drink bottled ice beer that was advertised on the television. Their gardens are impeccable, the flowers bloom, the trees fruit, the soil is brown. They exterminate the worms, the ants, the beetles. Their cats feed upon the eggs of birds. Larry, Tim, Peter, Saul, William, Carl, Lee, Jake, Richard, Sam and Eliot drink cocktails in the morning sun with Macy, Lucy, Jane, Mary, Jean, Elizabeth, May, Wendy, Lilly, Fanny and Viv.

On Saturdays they go to the mall and then watch a movie while eating buttery popcorn and drinking Diet Dr. Pepper. On Sundays they go to church and pray to God to save them. They eat steaks, chicken, and pork. They coach football, softball, soccer. They laugh at the jokes they tell over and over and over again. They are interested in each others' little histories. They share recipes and talk about the television shows. They are very

excited about their DNA. They exchange music, movies, and ideas. Larry, Tim, Peter, Saul, William, Carl, Lee, Jake, Richard, Sam and Eliot bask in the sun around the swimming pool with Macy, Lucy, Jane, Mary, Jean, Elizabeth, May, Wendy, Lilly, Fanny and Viv.

The new dreams fade and linger with the old dreams. They stand outside and stare at the stars and smoke. They wave and say good night sleep tight as the embers die as the smoke dissipates. They love to sleep but fear rigor mortis. They drink cocktails in the morning sun. They overdose on a myriad of pills. The alligators feed upon the turtles. Every Monday a little girl wanders onto the road and is hit by a speeding truck. They stand at the curbside and cheer. They take pictures with their new improved cameras that just keep getting better. They erase all abstraction. Every Friday a little boy falls out of a tree. One day somebody came up with the idea to catch the boy. It was very boring. They grill hotdogs and drink Coca-Cola to the sound of bones breaking. Larry, Tim, Peter, Saul, William, Carl, Lee, Jake, Richard, Sam and Eliot dance with Macy, Lucy, Jane, Mary, Jean, Elizabeth, May, Wendy, Lilly, Fanny and Viv.

We help our neighbors to burn down their homes. We disable their smoke machines, we pour inflammable liquid on their back doors, we mess with the electrical systems. When the fire service turns up we act shocked, we ask silly questions and turn into obstacles. We stand and watch the fires. We break into our neighbors' homes and steal jewelry, electronics, and money. We urinate on the carpets, we defecate in strange places. Foxes feed upon the placentas. We teach our teenage daughters to sleep with cockatoos, wolves, lions. We force our teenage boys to rebel, to disfigure themselves, to smoke crack. Larry, Tim, Peter, Saul, William, Carl, Lee, Jake, Richard, Sam and Eliot get naked and sleep with Macy, Lucy, Jane, Mary, Jean, Elizabeth, May, Wendy, Lilly, Fanny and Viv.

Paul Kavanagh's writing credits include poetry and short stories in *Sleeping fish*, *Burnside Review*, *Fifth Wednesday Journal*, *Pen Pusher*, *Better Non Sequitur*, *Nano Fiction*, *Evergreen Review*, *Marginalia*, and *Upstairs at Duroc*.

Tinderlands

greenfly cake the sappy tips of broom
where seed pods, still green for now, ripen in the sun.
Beneath our feet, where tinder-dry mosses wilt
clover and vetch compete for space
with a dozen varieties of grass
and yarrow scents the air with acrid pollen.
Thistles tall as my shoulder bare the purple canopies
to the sun and wind, where passing bees can feast
and spread the pollen from one to the next.
Wild geranium, pink as a baby's smile,
scatters stars among the willow branches.
Among the undergrowth the buzz of courting grasshoppers
as dogs race through grassland taller than themselves.

Overhead the wind whips sullen sheep-like cumulous
across the canopy of steely blue.

Rachel Green is a forty-something writer from Derbyshire, England. She lives with her two partners and three dogs. She has several books, both poetry and novels, available via www.leatherdyke.co.uk When not writing, Rachel walks her three dogs, potters in the garden and drinks copious amounts of tea.

NEIL KELLY

When the Dead Were Young*For Frank Stanford*

Walking through a city cemetery
I stopped to read every one of

the hundred or so weathered headstones.
The names were real and so was the history.

A small four-seater airplane buzzed the horizon,
tickled the armpits of someone's god.

I picked up a stone and threw it towards the sun,
poked at the eyes of a decomposing bird.

The gravediggers watched me while drinking beers and
smoking cigarettes on their lunch break. A station wagon

drove up a gravel drive to a wooden fist that had a sad lean.
A woman and a small boy exited the parked car.

They brought flowers and a goat's head to the wooden fist
which had no name or dates. I remembered that one

because I had almost tripped over it walking to the outhouse.
The boy removed toy soldiers from his pockets,

positioned them on the banks of a mud puddle.
The woman cried. She looked deep into the sky above,

made the sign of the cross. The boy spotted me, smiled and
jumped into the puddle. The woman felt the splashes of water

hit her, drip down her bare legs. I looked around,
but the gravediggers were gone. The two got back into

the station wagon and headed to the road.
I was left there, living alone.

Neil Kelly was born and raised in South Bend, In. He currently loves living in Denver, Co. Lots of good beer to drink. His work has appeared in *Margie*, *Gutter Eloquence* and *Black Book Press*.

SAMRASNAKE

**For the Reader, Turning Pages in a Book,
Happy Thanksgiving**

– after Los Desastres de la Guerra

In the etchings of loss and war by Goya
there's not one contented moment, no
pause, no burst of satisfaction. And you,
seated at your safe table in a well lit room,
food in the oven, people coming over,
the talk and laughter, "Hi, how are you –"
thousands of miles and scores of years
from any truth – no wish you were here
in these settings. Impossible to envy
the art or the artist, to love the very human
body of his hand. The rape, the stolen clothes,
and wasted fields. An admiration of the dead
on the happy face gluttoned with a job well done.
The world is a plague but is what you were born for.

Sam Rasnake's poetry has appeared recently or will appear in *FRiGG*, *OCHO*, *Shampoo*, *Naugatuck River Review*, *Press 1*, *Istanbul Literary Review*, *Otoliths*, *MiPOesias*, *Metazen*, and *BluePrintReview*, as well as the anthologies *Best of the Web 2009* (Dzanc Books), *Deep River Apartments* (The Private Press), and *BOXCAR Poetry Review Anthology 2*. His third collection, *Inside a Broken Clock*, is forthcoming from Finishing Line Press.

SUZANNE FRISCHKORN

Suzanne Frischkorn is the author of *Girl on a Bridge*, (2010) and *Lit Windowpane* (2008), both from Main Street Rag Publishing. In addition she is the author of five chapbooks, most recently, *American Flamingo* (2008). Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Copper Nickel*, *Ecotone*, *Indiana Review*, *North American Review*, *Palabra*, and elsewhere. She serves as an Assistant Poetry Editor for *Anti-*.

Pool

Desire your name is Miami,
stirred with a snip of sugarcane,
crushed mint, Bacardi, and sunning
yourself by the Biltmore pool. No, Miami,

I sip mojitos, while I am stroked by the eyes
of the cabana boy – he is heady
with a cocktail of bikini and tropical oil. “You know
how when you go to Little Italy it’s all Chinese now?
That’s how Little Havana is, but with South Americans.”

We decided to skip it and drink
mojitos by the pool. “Cubans?
They’re everywhere,” says the concierge
with a Cuban wave of his hand.

“Maybe, you’ll see some signs with Spanish writing...”
We drank mojitos by the side of the pool,
while I was desired, and realized

I don’t desire you, Miami.
Miami, you are not what I recalled
yet, only within you do I feel desired.



Split Personality by Derrick Tyson

A Swallow of Cola

My mother calls me "yellow" like it's my name — calls me this 'cause she says beneath all of my dark, there's the yellow I once was as a baby. "Your father was so stingy," she says a lot of the time when she's at the sink washing dishes, her back to me, "he had to take his color along with him when he left!" And she means it — acts as if, before he took off, he leaned into the crib and took back his yellow. She shows me pictures of when I was a baby and I was as yellow as she says. In the supermarket, in the dairy aisle, she'll recall that yellow and say, "You was real yellow, like butter." At the beach, when the sun is full on us, she'll recall that yellow and sing, "You was yellow alright, just like the sun." And if it weren't for those pictures, I wouldn't believe her. I'm dark — like my mother, like her sisters, like her mother, like her father.

Dark. Nobody believes the picture on the table by the sofa is me as a baby. Folks' jaws drop and they get that "what happened?" look to their eyes. You should see my mother proving that it's me. "See right there, that mark on the left side of her chin — she still got it." And the folks say, "Ah! Sho' is her then!" And they shake their heads — swear up and down my dark is the work of some hex. But my mother says my father wouldn't put a hex on me. "He didn't love me enough to wanna hurt me by hurtin' my child," she tells them and they nod. "He was just stingy is all," My mother says to company, "only wanted that yellow for himself." And she means it — makes them believe my father put my yellow in a sack, tied it 'round a stick, and took off. But you can't steal skin, my friend Jose says. He says all babies are born with no color just about. I tell him I know that and that it's just my mother talking crazy. Jose says he can't picture me yellow nohow — says it was alright on me as a baby, but as a grown girl he says "No way!" and frowns as if yellow is the nastiest color in the crayon box. My mother says Jose don't know what he's talking about. "Yellow, girl," she says, "your father is a thief. He got hold to your yellow and run off — that's what he did." When I tell Jose this, he laughs and says of my mother (imitating and sounding just like my grandmother): "Your mother's loony as a jaybird."

Jose is silly, but he knows what he's talking about. My mother says I gotta watch out for Jose. She says he may be silly and all the time laughin' and smilin' and imitatin' folks, but "he's got a meanness in him," my mother says. She says she can see it in his eyes. "Yellow, girl, keep your eye on that Jose. He might just steal something from you one of these days," she said once while brushing my long, curly hair — the hair she says my father had sense enough to leave behind. "Still stingy, though," she says. I don't know about this meanness she thinks Jose has. Jose wouldn't steal a thing — wouldn't even steal his own bike back if he had the chance. She thinks twelve is too young to know what she means by "something" when she says that he might steal something from me one of these days. I know what she means. And Jose ain't studying me about that. He just likes me the way I am. He likes my hair when it's pinned up and hiding its length; he likes the mark on my chin and the nicks on my shins; he likes the chipped nail polish on my short, round boy-nails; he likes the hair starting to grow under my arms and he likes the smell there when my deodorant is wearing off. "You smell like something cooking," he sometimes says when he smells me after I've been running and jumping around — my deodorant long wore off. Once when, on one of those days I had been running and jumping around, we were leaning against his fence, he told me:

"If your father did do what your mother say — steal your yellow — that's the best thing he coulda done for you."

"Why you say so?" I said, biting my low nails.

"Because I like you dark," he said yanking my hand away from my mouth but not in a mean way 'cause Jose don't have meanness in him like my mother says.

"Even if Luther don't?" I said putting my hands in my pockets. Luther is a boy at school who pokes fun at my dark. Luther says people ain't dark like me no more. "Everybody's mixed with somethin'," Luther says, 'cept you."

A Swallow of Cola

"I'm not thinking 'bout Luther," Jose said and he puffed out his cheeks to look like Luther. We were quiet for a while after that until Jose smiled and said he could smell me.

"You don't smell yellow," he said sniffing me up close.

"And what yellow smell like?" I said letting him sniff me.

"Aw, yellow smells like," he said, "... like ... like ... like a garden with too many flowers, with too many humming birds, with too many—"

"Nothing wrong with that, Jose," I said and I meant it. I moved away from the fence then and told him I had to get home.

"Yeah, but I don't like it," he said and grabbed me back by my elbow but not in a mean way 'cause Jose is the kindest boy on our block. I didn't say a word after that, but Jose kept waiting for me to say something. When I didn't, he said, "You know what I like?" I shook my head and he still had a hold of my elbow. "I like—" and he went on and on about how he liked how my dark smelled like back home and how if his grandfather was alive his grandfather would say the same thing. Oh, he kept saying, you smell like back home. He said his grandfather used to say that all the time to some lady he started seeing (who was dark like me) after his wife, Jose's grandmother, died. But he never said where back home was and nobody knew where Jose was from— not even Jose.

"You know what?" he said catching up to me 'cause I had started to head home because I knew my mother would start hollering for me soon.

"What?" I said slowing up just a little.

"Every time I see you, I want a swallow of cola," he said smiling like he made that up. I knew he was probably saying something he had heard his grandfather say, but I didn't mind so I smiled too. "I like that you're the color of cola," he said and I knew he probably got that from his grandfather, too.

"Ha!" I said.

"It's true," he said and smiled and in one hop he was at my side.

Michelle McEwen, poet and storyteller, has had work published in *Poets/Artists*, *The Caribbean Writer*, and *The Best New Poets 2007* (An anthology). Her short story "The Joneses" will be featured in the upcoming short story anthology *Woman's Work*.

Marc Vincenz is of Swiss-British descent, was born in Hong Kong, and worked in China for many years. More recently based out of Iceland, he writes a featured column for The Reykjavik Grapevine, Iceland's English language newspaper and for Australia's Trespass Magazine. His poetry has appeared, or is forthcoming in various journals, including: Poetry Salzburg Review, the nervous breakdown and Ducts. He is currently putting the finishing touches on two collections of poetry, and a spoken-word CD.

The General and His Little Panda Paws

In the parking lot of the Shanghai Waigaoqiao Customs and Excise Building, Shanghai, 2000.

The General doesn't like to be kept waiting.

He'll be washing his hands a dozen times,
scrubbing under his fingernails,
soaping his palms limber and white

like he always does before every meal;
then he'll just sit there legs crossed,
smoking, puffing on his hot tea until it cools.
He won't drink it until you arrive,

he'll just play with the leaves, watching
them fall and rise, until they sink
to the bottom fluttering there like seaweed.
Only then, he says, is it ready to sip,

when water and tea have become one.
He's gone to a huge amount of trouble tonight,
flown in wood pigeons and birds' nest soup from Sichuan.
You know how they harvest those nests?

Dangling on thin ropes on cliff sides at the crack of dawn.
The General abhors eating alone.
We should give him a ring, only his assistant will never answer.
She's stupid as they come.

You know why he hired her?
It was her tiny feet. *Little Panda Paws* he calls her.
He told me once, he likes to watch her padding
barefoot across the wooden floor of his office with hot tea.

It makes him think he's back three hundred years
and she, his Spring Blossom who could never run away
even if she tried. Sometimes he takes her
right there on his desk, wearing his medals, her apricot arse

plonked on top of all the papers like a perfect paperweight.
He especially likes to do it on bank statements,
insurance policies and, shipping contracts,
anything a little heavyweight.

Says, it helps him to lighten the burden.
Hurry yourself, hurry yourself up.
You know full well he doesn't like to eat alone,
and we can't let the General's tea get stone cold.

GRACE CAVALIERI

There is no End to this Map

The maps of our bodies are different now, the slender hands,
the old hands. Passing through the door of our age is a garden
where willows grow upward, where the rivers run blue.

Scarred by what we've left and what left us, our car is packed
with hope. You move toward a place in the mountains.

I look for miracles in the New Yorker

and to the feelings no language can speak, the sound of the rain
on the wall. Let us go back to where we began, the crossing of the
street on the way to school, the piano lessons.

Nothing will remain but our song following us to the first sound
ever made —by rock—by pen, making a melody from far away.
When I hear it, I know the song must be true. It is the only place there is.

Did we begin in India? Greece? St. Petersburg? No, before that
in Atlantis where someone gave us a magic gift of beads saying.
carry these and in the heart hold of our faith, we found the colors
hidden and broken on separate stones, tucked in among the rocks.
One by one, the hands who touched these touched ours.

The center of these hands still hold the stones of Atlantis,
now resting beneath the sea. Once Atlantis was a city of circles
connected by canals and bridges where each bead made a path
suddenly luminous. There were directions falling off the string
leading us here today where the sun falls on the horizon from
the beginning to the end, where we spelled out in our broken way
connections to all we see, how it felt creating what we knew of the earth
In a language, from another time.

There is memory in these woods. The trees on the mountain shine red.
That was a day like this once while losses damaged and raged,
toward hands and throat, making things where nothing existed before,
or we would have been just two more who came and went
without ever having recognizing each other. Or where we'd been.

Grace Cavalieri is a poet and a playwright. She is Book Review Editor of *The Montserrat Review*, and a contributor to *MiPOesias*. She has edited a new book due in September, 2010: *THE POET'S COOKBOOK, Recipes from Germany*: with food poems in German and English.

ROBERT LEE BREWER

Robert Lee Brewer is the editor of Poet's Market and maintains the Poetic Asides blog, in addition to several other blogs and projects. In 2010, Brewer was voted co-Poet Laureate of the Blogosphere with Sina Queyras and he was also invited to be the January Guest Poet on Poets.org Discussion Forum. He is married to the poet Tammy Foster Brewer and has four boys between the ages of one and nine. He can be contacted at robertleebrewer@gmail.com

anywhere we dare go

the copper scent of a
summer shower
sends us across our
remembered crushes
left hidden in wet
grass and creek
water.

her skin was soft; his
hands were strong;
somewhere
a bird cried out as
the wind bent
branches
that only barely
resisted bending.

in the evening, you'll
recall, the stars
fell out of the sky and
danced around them
as we only worried
about ourselves.

The Art of Listening

KIRKCURNUTT

Me and the D. were almost to the party when she dropped the bomb. Turns out the Nunns' BBQ wasn't just celebrating their daughter's high-school graduation. That morning Hadley had run to the courthouse to jump broom with an Air Force private she'd known for exactly two months. The D. is the kid's godmother, so just breaking me the news turned her seven shades of upset. All she could say was, "Why would a girl so smart do something so stupid?" That and that the newlyweds met at a show at the amphitheater. I forgave my wife for seeming to imply that because the concert starred my trio, the Sassafras 3, the fault was mine.

"Should we get a different present?" I asked. "I'm not sure a Books-a-Million gift card is appropriate for a wedding reception."

"It's a \$50 card. That's \$45 more than we have for a present right now. Plus, if we get Had something marriage-y we're condoning what she's done. Annulment's her only hope."

"Only hope? She doesn't have a terminal disease. Who knows—maybe they can make it. Not everybody who marries straight out of high school ends up the worse for it."

The D. shot me a look. "Name one marriage we know that's been together since high school. Hell, Freddie. Name one marriage we know that's still together period."

She had a point. Recently, three couples in our circle had split—none cleanly or congenially. Socializing had been more work than fun lately. I tried to spin the grief we'd witnessed by reminding my wife of something very important. "Our marriage is still together," I said. But the D. was too preoccupied for valentines.

"I can already tell," she sighed, "I'm going to have to pound the Pinot to get through today."

And pound it she did. As Dana Nunn fried okra and her husband, Paul, scrubbed his grill grate outside, the D. went through a half bottle of Torre Rosazza in about three gulps. I started on a Fat Tire, but when I spotted another guest stirring sangria in the dining room, I didn't bother finishing my beer. I slipped right up to the woman and told her I was lured by the chime of her spoon as it rang the sides of her glass pitcher.

"I saw you tuck your bottle on the counter," she winked. She was bottle blond, in her early sixties, heavily rouged. When she smiled her lipstick caked in

dabs at the dry edges of her mouth. "Shame, shame. You shouldn't waste Fat Tire. You can't get it around here, you know. I'm Dana's sister, Patsy. You're Denise's husband, aren't you?"

She didn't even give me time to apologize for ditching the beer, much less answer. Patsy filled my glass and within five minutes told me more than most people share on a first date. She'd been a ticket agent with Pan-Am, but since they went belly-up she'd kicked around, most recently helping an ex-boyfriend run a bar in Memphis. At first she waitressed, but once Sammy started living with her she took over the books. When I managed to break in to ask who Sammy was, Patsy smiled and sighed in one gesture, as if she couldn't decide which expression to put on the story.

"Oh, that's my great-grandson. Can you believe it? I'm not even retirement age, and I'm already somebody's great-grandma."

There was no getting out of the story, so I let her tell it. Turns out her granddaughter, Ashley, was hooked on Xanax. It began innocently with a prescription, but now she was snorting the stuff. When Patsy found out, she tried to get the kid treatment, but any rehab worth its salt costs a good \$10,000, and Ash was hardheaded so it probably wouldn't take anyway. Her father—Patsy's son—was no help because he was stationed in Phoenix. It was just a matter of time before Sammy went to foster care, so Patsy did the only thing she could and took him herself. She raised that great-grandson for nearly a year while Ash partied heartily on. Only Patsy was too old to keep pace with a three-year-old, so finally she broke down and called her son and told him in no uncertain terms that he needed to get his tail back to Alabama to do right by this boy.

"Now two women have passed him off," she concluded. "I hope knowing that doesn't mess him up."

I sensed from the outset where the story was headed, so I didn't need to hear it to follow it. Instead, I was eavesdropping on the D., who was in the next room, whispering with Dana. I guess I got a little distracted because I didn't notice when Patsy stopped.

"You're not even listening, are you?" she groaned, squeezing my elbow.

"I'm sorry.... I think my wife is telling stories about me. She has a bad habit of that when I'm not around."

I excused myself, but not before refilling my sangria. When I slipped into the kitchen I discovered the powwow was private.

"The okra smells great," I apologized. "I couldn't resist."

"It'll be a few more minutes," Dana answered, ashen as the cornmeal on her hands.

I took my cue and left. I wandered into the living room only to realize I didn't know many other guests. I tried to make small talk, but I'm no bullshitter, so I pretended I needed to pee. I figured I'd hang out for ten minutes or so, give the D. time to talk, and after that I wouldn't leave her side until we left the party.

The door to the bathroom was ajar so I just went in gangbusters. Of course, there was somebody inside. And, of course, it had to be Hadley. Fortunately, she wasn't on the pot. She was at the mirror, fresh from the pool, a big girl in an ill-fitting bikini.

"You ever hear of knocking?" she said.

"I have when a door is shut. Next time I won't assume."

"You know what they say about assuming, Mr. Freddie."

I couldn't decide if I was offended because she was rude or because she'd socked me with a cliché. Honestly, I hadn't been keen on Had for a while. She was a cute kid before adolescence but the princess thing had soured into surliness and now she was one of those teenagers who have no problem letting you know your very existence is an affront. I guess I got caught up in thinking how little I liked her now because I didn't realize we were staring at each other in that mirror. I got the queasy feeling she thought I was checking her out just because she was an eighteen-year-old in a wet bikini. I was tempted to tell her assumptions befall the best of us.

"I hear congrats are in order, Had. What are you and this husband gonna do? Do you have a place yet? You still going to school come fall?"

She knocked her hairbrush twice against the onyx countertop, flinging dribble over her mother's toiletries. "I don't know," she shrugged.

"You haven't thought that far ahead?"

She shrugged again. I was annoyed, more with myself than with her. I let her aloofness bait me into interrogating her, just so she could feel the persecution of adult disapproval. "I'll hit the other can," I said, and I left her to gloat in detachment.

Out in the living room D. worked overtime to entertain. She was in front of the TV, hands in motion like she was doing standup, halfway through this old chestnut about a hapless girlfriend of hers, Jesse, who worried she was sick because she was losing weight. The D. always delivers this story when a party needs enlivening.

"....Now, mind you, Jesse doesn't know she's getting thin because she's checking the scale. She won't weigh herself. She's *thinking* she must be losing weight because her panties don't fit. They're baggy on her—"

"That's when you go see a doctor," some woman jumped in. "You can't procrastinate. My father did. People told him he looked emaciated but he blew them off. When he finally got himself checked out, it was too late. Pancreatic cancer. He was gone in six weeks."

The interruption flustered the D. "Well, Jesse *can't* go to a doctor. She's an undergrad without insurance. Plus she's not positive she's paring down. It's all in the unmentionables. Jesse spends tons on lingerie, but suddenly none of it's snug."

I closed my eyes to enjoy her voice. The D.'s timbre is reedy, sort of like bagpipes, and when she gets animated she talks tunefully. Sometimes when I hear her I imagine what piano keys I'd have to hit to imitate her melody, and what chords I'd build around those notes, and then what style of music she'd be. We have this long-running joke about how different our personalities are: she's a jig, I'm a waltz.

"So this goes on for about three weeks. Her boyfriend thinks she's going nuts because she keeps asking if her ass looks flat. Not *fat* but *flat*. Then one day the cops show up. They ask if she's ever had the maintenance man fix her air conditioner. And, of course, about a month earlier she'd had to get a blown outlet replaced. So the cops ask if since then Jesse's noticed anything odd in her dresser. You see where this is going, don't you? Turns out Mr. Fix-It had a—ahem—*panty fetish*. He was slipping into the girls' dormrooms while they were in class and slipping on their underwear."

It wasn't her best delivery, but other guests laughed and groaned and a female or two even squirmed. The only one who didn't was the woman who'd interrupted the D. "That really happened?" she asked. You might as well have slapped my wife across the mouth. She threw up her hands. "Of course it did! You think I'd make something like that up?"

I thought things might get confrontational, but the D. laughed the woman off. So did the other guests, but I was irritated. I went to the only person I knew, Toby Wirther, and broke into the conversation he was having with this short guy.

"Who's the heckler and what's up her heine that she's such a skeptic?"

"The skeptic would be this man's wife," Toby answered, dry as the Old Fitz he nursed. "You'll have to ask him what she sat on."

The Art of Listening

I felt like a twat, so I apologized. The husband, whose name was Stewart, waved away my embarrassment. “That’s just Beth. She didn’t mean to seem like she’s grilling. She’s just eager. I have to tell her there’s such a thing as ‘floor rights.’ I teach speech, you see, so I know more about the way people share stories than anybody should. The idea is that when somebody’s talking you have to learn to read for the natural cues they use to invite audience participation. Maybe it’s a pause or maybe it’s a question, but without that cue, you’re just breaking in.”

Toby defended Stewart’s wife. “Maybe Beth has a good reason for thinking she’s always got the floor. She teaches second grade, after all.”

I asked what school, and Barb’s husband named a private Episcopalian one. Toby mentioned that the D. teaches, too, so Stewart asked where she worked and after I told him public he asked if that’s what I did as well. Toby mustn’t have been listening to all that floor rights stuff because he cut right in and told Stewart I was a musician. “So you’re in a band?” Stewart asked, and I said, yes, drums. Toby jumped in again, telling Stewart that he and Beth ought to check out the Sassafras 3 sometime. Stewart wanted to know what kind of music. I waited to see if Toby would answer for me, but he didn’t, so I told Stewart we play what pays. He grimaced because he knew what that meant: covers.

“Let me guess: ‘Brown-Eyed Girl,’ ‘Margaritaville,’ and ‘Sweet Home Alabama.’ Barb and I don’t get out much, but when we do, that seems to be the set-list.”

“Don’t forget ‘Play that Funky Music.’ I used to resent the hell out of those songs. We tried slipping in prog stuff—you know, odd time signatures, weird tunings, key changes—but nobody cared about musicianship. We learned something very important: give the people what they want.”

“Can you make a living in a bar band?”

It was the question I didn’t want to hear. True to form, Toby whisked right in and blabbed it.

“Freddie used to run the city amphitheater. He did everything, managing the equipment, booking, publicity. The sunset concert series was all Freddie. He’s the reason we had live music without having to drive to Atlanta. But when the economy tanked concert funding was the first to go. It stinks. Freddie added a lot to this city’s quality of life.”

“So what’s your plan?” Stewart asked me. It was the second unwanted question.

“I’ve got plenty of plans but no capital. I’m trying to figure something out.”

“I’m sure it’s hard, but you have to think of this time as an opportunity. A chance to reboot.”

The advice wasn’t anything I hadn’t heard before. I took a swallow to bolster my reply.

“No opportunity about it, Stewart. I’m forty-seven years old. I’m three months into unemployment and feeling lousy about my prospects has me feeling lousy about myself. The one offer I’ve had is a gig cleaning pools with my cousin’s service. I was never deluded enough to think I’d be a rock star, but I always thought I’d do something with music. The amphitheater was everything I ever wanted.”

As Toby and Stewart stared to their sandals, I wished I was Had. Then I could shrug off questions.

“I get so ticked with myself when I say shallow shit like that,” Stewart confessed. “I can name you theory upon theory I’ve studied about conversational dynamics and the art of supportive listening. If there’s one thing these studies insist is universal, it’s that popping off platitudes doesn’t nurture the exchange. It shuts it down, in fact. I’m sorry, Freddie. I should know how to convey empathy and encourage a story.”

“Oh God,” Toby moaned. “The touchy-feely kills me. What’s wrong with this party, anyway? The minute we walked in I told Kate the vibe was weird.”

“You don’t know?” It wasn’t really a question, so I didn’t wait for an answer. “Hadley got hitched this morning. Don’t ask me why. And definitely don’t ask her. She can’t explain it, either.”

They were both shocked. Toby excused himself to get the skinny from Paul. That left Stewart and me looking into our drinks. He was waiting for me to accept his apology. I wasn’t feeling so generous. “I guess I better make sure my wife’s not stealing anybody’s floor,” he glumly smiled.

I sat on the couch. I must’ve looked pretty miserable, because the D. plopped down and asked if I was all right.

“We’ve been here forty minutes. It feels like three hours.”

“Getting mopey’ll only amp up the weirdness. Maybe you could go out to the pool and talk to Paul.”

“I’m talked out. That Patsy talked my ears off. How about we slip off and go for a walk. I really want to be with you, alone. I need a reason to be happy.”

She gave me a wry smile. “You know we can’t do that. It’d be rude. Buck up. You’ll feel better lightening somebody else’s load.”

We were interrupted by Toby’s wife, Kate. She was snacking off a plate of spinach dip. I could tell she was loosey-goosey because as she talked she chewed. Remnants of Ritz cracker packed the webs of her gums.

“Y’all stop it. Y’all are too cute. You make the rest of us feel inadequate.”

“We’ve got our problems,” the D. assured her.

The Art of Listening

"Notice how quickly she said that," I joked.

Kate chewed away. "If I have to hear Freddie say 'me and the D.' one more time I'm going to keel over from sugar shock. Smoochy shock even."

"I'm more worried about you keeling over from chardonnay shock."

My wife elbowed my love handles. The woman who'd interrupted the D.'s story swiveled her chair our direction. "Why do you call her 'the D.'?" Barb asked.

"It's the grade she's famous for giving her sixth-graders."

Everybody except Barb knew this wasn't true, so they laughed.

"We've been together nearly thirty years," I said. "I started saying 'the D.' because back then I jammed a lot with soul cats. All those black musicians had goofy nicknames for each other. A sax player'd be called 'Thumb Rest' because there's a little hook on the back of a sax that fits over your thumb to hold the instrument up—that sort of silliness. I remember being nineteen and thinking the coolest way to say you love a woman is to give her a nickname. Not a mushy one, just something snappy. So one night after a gig these cats invite us to an afterparty, and instead of saying 'we' I went, 'Me and the D.' It stuck."

"Good thing your name doesn't begin with a letter that doesn't rhyme with 'me,'" Barb told my wife. "'Me and the I' or 'Me and the O' don't have the same ring."

"There's an intimacy between words when they rhyme that makes me think of the intimacy a marriage should have," I said. "I don't care if it's not grammatical. That was my worst subject in school. I'd much rather say 'me and the D.' than 'Denise and myself.'"

"That's not grammatical either," my wife pointed out.

"See! She'd have given me a D if I was in her class!"

I was almost starting to feel better. If I couldn't be alone with my wife at least I could talk about why I love her. But then I caught Dana listening in from the threshold to the kitchen. Hadley was behind her, whispering in her ear. I imagined the kid telling her mother I was checking her out in the bathroom mirror.

Dana asked if I would run the meat out to the grill. When I saw the platter I couldn't believe how high she'd piled the food. There were pork ribs with burgers stacked to one side and chicken shish kabobs to the other. I asked what squadron Dana was expecting to feed. She didn't even smile. Then I remembered Had's new husband was an Air Force guy, and I felt like a dick.

On my way to the grill I passed Toby. He shook his head and let his lips ripple with a fluster bubble. I took it

to mean Paul was none too chatty. I wondered why cheering him had become my job.

Only Paul wasn't quiet at all. He shook my hand and patted my back and nearly pole-axed me with joviality. He asked me about eight variations of the same question: "Whatcha been up to lately?" At one point I said, "Trying to find something to do," and when I volleyed a "How about you?" he went, "Trying to avoid the things I have to do." Meanwhile, the meat sputtered and popped over the charcoal, and the smell and the heat grew as oppressive as the forced friendliness. When I realized I'd finished my sangria, I decided to give Paul two more minutes and then excuse myself to go back to getting irreparably drunk.

Only before I could some guy I didn't know marched up to the pool edge and with sort of a half-flip flopped into the deep end. I asked who that was.

"That," Paul answered with a click of his tongs, "is my new son-in-law."

"Holy hell—Had's married?"

"C'mon, Freddie. I'm sure Denise told you the story."

"Well, actually, no—not the story, just that Had'd done it. I'm not sure D. knows the scoop."

He flipped the meat, his face as much grimace as grin. I pretended his expression was from the sizzle of the grill, which belched flukes of smoke. "Hey, you know what? It's her life. She wants to do it? Let her. We all got to grow up sometime. Better sooner than later, I say. Charlie seems like a good kid. I hope he'll treat her right."

"So what are they going to do? I mean, you gonna let them live here with you and Dana?"

"You know what, Freddie? Let's not talk about what they're gonna do. It's not really our business."

At least the guy was polite enough to say "our" instead of "your." "I'm just trying to make conversation, Paul. I'll go drink instead."

I went and refilled my sangria. I'd hoped to drain it fast, but Toby caught me before I could even swig once.

"He go all Stepford husband on you, too?"

"Remind me never to lend an ear to a guy in need again. I don't need my ears bit off for trying to be nice. It's not like I care, anyway."

Toby went all grave and said he had a question that needed asking. He wanted to know if Paul had ever acted weird around the D. Not hitting-on uncomfortable, just presuming friendliness. I told him I didn't know what he meant.

The Art of Listening

"Let me give you a situation, and you tell me if I'm off. A couple of weeks ago Kate and I had Paul and Dana over for dinner. Kate went whole-hog, cooked great. When we finished eating, I said, 'You know what? You ladies rest and let us gents clear the table. That's only fair.' So I'm trucking an armload to the sink, and what does Paul do? He takes one tureen into the kitchen and then starts giving Kate a shoulder rub. Granted, she'd been complaining how knotty she felt, but still..."

"He was touching your wife in front of you?"

"He's never done that to Denise?"

"I doubt he's got the rocks. The D. intimidates men."

"That massage got me thinking. I can't decide if I should make a deal of it or not. Paul's been all cuddles the past few months. Watch when people load up this afternoon: he'll be all over the women. Nothing gropey, just ... huggy. I don't think he means anything by it. Just because something's not wrong, though, doesn't mean it's not uncool—"

Before I could answer Patsy barged in. I expected her to apologize for interrupting, but she didn't. She looked straight to Toby while pointing at me: "Stopper your secrets, honey. This one's not a good listener."

"That's not true! I heard everything you shared with me earlier. I've been meaning to tell you that you shouldn't feel guilty about Sammy. I think you should go out to Arizona and see him. A visit from you will bowl that boy over."

Toby enjoyed my embarrassment. "Well, if Freddie's such a lame listener, maybe you can tell me what the deal is with Paul and other guys' wives. He's like a puppy wanting his belly rubbed lately."

Patsy asked the dumbest question possible: "You haven't heard?" Of course, it wasn't really a question. It was a hook, and Paul and I went for it. We leaned in conspiratorially as Patsy glanced over her shoulder making sure nobody could hear.

"The IRS is into him for \$130,000. Paul hasn't paid payroll taxes for four years. It's the most self-destructive thing I've ever seen—he just pocketed his employees' deductions. Now the government's put a lien on the house. Next time you come here for a BBQ, Uncle Sam'll be grilling."

I didn't know how to respond. I wish hadn't said anything at all, but I'm a blurter: "Now we know why a girl as smart as Had would do something as stupid as get hitched."

Before we could press Patsy for details the D. stuck her head in the room to announce it was chow time. We followed her through the sliding glass door, where I mumbled into Toby's ear, wondering why we were eating outside when it was so hot. Toby shrugged and said

maybe the IRS hadn't seized the patio furniture yet. I was afraid he'd said it loud enough for my wife to hear. I didn't want her thinking I was a gossip.

Outside the heat only made the weirdness all the more stifling. We gathered around the wrought-iron table and heaped baked beans and cucumber salads onto Duraclear plates. Not one among twenty of us raised a brow when Hadley's new husband joined in. That told me everybody knew exactly who he was. Some of us dug our teeth into the spare ribs to not broach the topic. Others barely touched their food they were so busy keeping the conversation harmless. My wife was one of them. Somehow she got on the subject of these ferrets she keeps in her classroom.

"One time I met some other teachers for happy hour. It was the end of the term and we were all stressed so we drank up a storm. When the bill came, though, my wallet wasn't in my purse. We'd had a few incidents at school, so right away I decided some sneak thief had picked my pocket. I had the police come out and file a report. I canceled my credit cards that night and then took the next morning off to get a new driver's license. When I got back to school I treated the kids like crap. I was convinced one of them worked for Fagin. Then, after the students are gone, I hear this munching noise from under my desk. I have to get down on my hands and knees to see what's going on. Lo and behold, one of the ferrets is gnawing on my pocketbook like he's ripping into a rib-eye. The sucker's skinny enough to slip out of his cage and get into my purse. I would've killed him if I hadn't been so amazed at his strength."

Everybody chuckled except Barb. "You have a lot of interesting stories," she said. The way she pronounced stories, you knew she meant tales—as in lies. The D. bowed back a bit. Stewart caught her reaction and patted his wife's wrist. Barb didn't like that at all: "I'm allowed to talk as much as anybody else here is," she went.

"You sound like you don't believe me," the D. replied. "The ferret's true, though. That really did happen."

"I didn't say it didn't. All I said was it's an interesting story. I wasn't being sarcastic."

"I didn't take it that way either," Kate intervened.

"I could see how it could be interpreted as sarcastic," Toby disagreed. "Nobody says interesting anymore and means it sincerely. It's a loaded word."

"I say it sincerely all the time," Kate said.

"That's interesting," I jumped in.

"Why are y'all picking on me?" Barb wondered.

"Maybe because you're so interesting," Patsy suggested.

The Art of Listening

The joshing was all in good fun. Nobody took it too seriously, not even Barb. We were just passing around words with the same conviviality we passed the garlic bread. Only I could tell the amity irritated Hadley. She wasn't eating, just tracing shapes in her baked beans with her fork tines.

"I know I have a bad habit of being blunt," Barb admitted. "It's not because I'm rude. I'm just all impulse. I say what's on my mind. Stewart tells me I need to filter."

Stewart defended his wife: "People think folks without filters want to dominate a conversation. I don't think that's true. Not in Barb's case, anyway. It's more that you want to be a part of things, honey. You have a craving for connection that's the only real motivation for us talking to each other. We don't need information—we need contact."

"I think your husband just called you needy," Toby teased Barb.

"What I need from a conversation," Kate offered, "is succinctness. Is that even a word? No matter. Keep it short and sweet. You know what helps me not yak? I bore myself. Anytime I yammer I feel myself start to yawn, and I know it's cork-it time."

"I don't go on and on," Barb whimpered. "I'm just blunt, that's all."

The D. assured her we weren't talking about her. Meanwhile, Had'd taken all of a chomp of her shish kabob.

"I've got a story about a needy talker," I told them. "The guitar player in my band, Smoke Mumford, he had this groupie for a while. Any bar we'd play, she'd be there, and she'd stuff the tip jar with money she'd put in an envelope. For Smoke only."

"Babe," the D. cut in, concerned. "Are you talking about Tambourine Tami? You don't need to tell that story—not with kids around."

"What kids? Hadley's married. She's an adult! It's not a bad story; it's a funny story."

"Seriously, babe—no."

"So anyway ... this groupie's nickname is Tambourine Tami because every time we do 'Mustang Sally' she insists on nabbing said tambourine and banging away—on the wrong beat, mind you. But that's not the worst. She's such a fan of Smoke's that during breaks she sits with him and tells him her life story."

The whole time I talked, Had swirled her tines in those beans.

"Tami's story has every bit of melodrama you'd expect. She's been divorced twice, her kids are in and out of trouble with the law, she did tons of acid in the seventies that she claims scrambled her eggs—the

whole shebang. Now this goes on and on. Her stories always end the same way, too, with Tami going, 'This isn't the life I thought I'd lead. This isn't life I should have led.'"

Had wouldn't look up. It drove me nuts.

"The clincher is that after a while Smoke realizes he's sitting through the same stories. This woman can't even remember what she's shared with him already! The ones that drive him bonkers are about Tami's boyfriend, who's not, predictably, much of a boyfriend. He treats her like dirt, but she can't break it off because she doesn't want to be alone. So one night Tami's telling Smoke about this fight they had that ended with him telling her he can't deal with her anymore because the emotional upkeep wipes him out, and he gets sleepy at work. No kidding: he's dumping her because he's tired at work. 'Why would he say that after all we've been through?' That's what Tami keeps asking Smoke, like he's got an answer. Finally, one night Smoke's just had it. He hits the wall. He turns to her and he goes, 'Tami, I don't even fuck you and you're high maintenance.'"

Exactly two people laughed: me and Charlie, Hadley's new husband.

Nobody spoke until the D. finally did. "I hate that story," she said.

And that was it. Everybody diverted their eyes and stuffed their mouths. I stared at my plate, wondering if I should apologize. I was about to, but then Hadley stood up. She reached across the table, picked up the entrée platter, walked to the edge of the pool and with a shot-putter's grunt flung the meat over the deep end. The ribs, chicken, and kebobs rose slowly and then plummeted fast. They had just enough sizzle in them still that when they hit the water the hiss was as loud as the plunk.

"I don't think I'll have to drain the water," Paul said as he hoisted himself to the concrete. We men were stripped to our boxers, diving for the meat through tracers of marinade, barbecue sauce, flecks of char. "I'll just shock it. The chlorine should clear it."

I caught Toby's eye. We shared the same unspoken thought: Maybe the IRS'll do it.

We dried in the sun before I went inside to fetch towels. The bathroom door was ajar, and, of course, somebody was in it. I could hear the D. consoling Dana, who was sobbing. "Had'll come back," my wife was saying. "You've got to save yourself, though. You have to leave him. You know you do. You can stay with me."

"I don't understand why he'd do this. Everything we had—our savings, investments, the house, our future.... They're gone."

The Art of Listening

"He can't tell you why, and that's the problem. That's why you have to leave him."

"Paul was as good to us as Freddie is to you. I let him handle the money. I don't understand why he'd let Hadley and me down. Not like this."

"That's why you need to rely on yourself: everybody lets somebody down in the end."

"Freddie's never let you down. Everybody sees how much he loves you, how much he protects you. You have everything you ever wanted."

"I don't have financial security," I heard my wife answer.

Later, heading home, the D. was so wine-drowsy she didn't notice I missed our turnoff. We'd gone a good mile before she asked where we headed. I told her I just felt like driving.

"You think that's a good thing? We've been drinking all day. We can't afford a DUI."

I assured her I was sober. A long stretch of thoroughfare fell behind us before it hit her where I was going.

"Oh, Freddie—you're just going to make yourself feel bad."

But I pulled into the amphitheater parking lot anyway. The D. reluctantly followed as I walked the long stretch of manicured grass to the scaffold-latticed platform. Behind the clamshell roof the Alabama River sparkled in the moonlight. I hopped onto the stage and listened to the water lap the shoreline. The D. kept to the grass.

"Talk to me," she said. "Let's talk it out."

I would've liked to say that I really wasn't thinking of me. I was thinking about Tambourine Tami. About how ashamed I felt for telling that story about her. Smoke and I and the other guys had mocked her for nothing more than her need to be

heard. What would listening to her have cost me? Certainly a lot less respect than cracking on her did in the eyes of the Nunns' guests. Who knows? If I'd lent her the ear she needed I might've heard the things other people were trying to tell me.

I didn't want to get into all that with the D., though. I didn't feel worthy of the words it'd take to explain. Not when there was something more important I knew she needed to hear.

"Come Monday I'm taking that pool-cleaning gig. I don't know why I haven't already—pride, I guess."

I could tell it threw her. She was quiet for a while.

"The sangria's doing your talking."

I didn't blame her for not taking me seriously. It was just a promise, no proof to the pudding.

"Can we sit here a little bit and talk?" I asked. "I want to talk with you."

The D. sighed but hoisted herself onto the bandshell anyway. We lay down together. I told my wife I loved her, and she said it back. I didn't know what other words were necessary, but I wanted her to tell me something. I wanted to prove to her I was a good listener. The D. was too tired, though; we didn't get beyond a few minutes of wondering what it would've taken for Paul and Dana and Hadley to avoid the mess their lives were in before she dozed off. I was anything but sleepy. I listened to the sounds that crept across the amphitheater grounds: the breeze whisking the grass, the river rushing its current. I focused on those noises as if they fumbled to say something they didn't know how to articulate. I gave them my patience and let them know I was their confidant. I emptied myself of myself and waited for whatever the wind, the water worked up the willingness to share.

Kirk Curnutt is the author of two novels, *Dixie Noir* and *Breathing Out the Ghost*, and a short-story collection, *Baby, Let's Make a Baby*.

JOHN R CORNWALL

Note To A Lover

Cumuli gather
In a snarl,
Ascendant naiads
Of spring,
That one moment
In which everything
Happened.

Baroque, broken cherubs
Remind me of you,
The last perfection
In whose court personages
Glitter then vanish.

Now I am the collective
Clown in your circus,
Red-mouthed, white
Eyed, the funnelled
Bob hat. A winter.

If this matters, let me know.

Dryads

If you listen
And you can hear
Rain clatter
Over the town's
Industry,

We are not voices
In your ear musing
But the dull clack
Of another drop
On the metropolis

Whose movements
Mistake art for action,
Twist and follow
So that the mind
Simply does not focus

And everything becomes
Just something else,
Like rain,
Plunking hard
Into gutters.

Of Late Autumn

The fifth season
Hovers like a sigh
In a sky reddened, blued.
It is not invisible.

Between light and dreams
The birds list
Their continents.
Weary, the leaves
Paper shuffle.

A shuffled wind
Leaves its business,
Each tree fabulous
In discontent.

Soon there will
Be an evening,
A colouring
In which nothing
Matters.

So look now,
Look, find
Whatever is wanted,
Infuse then leave.

Nothing is invisible.

John Cornwall hails from the North Western region of England. He has had his work published in many print based magazines, mostly English, the most recent being an anthology of *Contemporary English Poetry*.

one : yellow

one

mutilation is not inspired by
storytelling

tho sometimes it is
it is too hot in this house to banter
e.g.

a woman encounters yesterday
even same the very

breeze mming a push across her
face

the next appetite corrects
appetite once

upon a time is insufferable
two at a time indicates fire or two

at a time a bit of fire

yellow

you mean a sound of less or more
& you are crookened

it is too bright
it is too simple & bright

it is boxed in & thought to stand
here
is to be felled

some sort of coming back

once you become an overgrowth
of sun you mean

there's no reason for family

you mean you can't sound it out

This summer, Stacy Kidd is completing a PhD in English at the University of Utah, where she served for two years as Poetry Editor at Quarterly West. Her poems have appeared in Bellevue Literary Review, Boston Review, Columbia, Eleven Eleven, The Iowa Review, New South, Washington Square, and WITNESS, among others. Her chapbooks *About Birds* and *A man in a boat in the summer* are forthcoming this July and August. She is editor of the new online journal of poetry intersection(s), launching this fall.

from Letters to Dead Masters

#3 Percy,

Certain critics have always claimed to see some naïve idealism in your poems, Percy, but you're right — if America had any idealism left, we wouldn't be stuck like a charred steak in the meat grinder we're in now. I think about this, I think about the drowning exercise you did to prepare for your encounter with Mr. Friends-with-the-Super-Conformists, I think about the fact that you enjoyed guitars and guitar music, and I come to no pertinent conclusions. The Fugazi Fighters came into the Grind today and I was forced to do my work within earshot of them. Their whole dish is that the Internet has not only destroyed their capacity to sell records, it's made touring impossible because nothing's broken down by region anymore — their fan-base is atopic. I've been watching these guys operate, with some limited success, for ten years — but it's always with the restraining impulse that nothing remarkable has happened yet, no bounds have been broken, no rivers crossed. How can I describe their music — it's like the noise a cat makes when heaved into a bathtub, amplified a hundred times. Not, of course, that I've ever heaved a cat into a bathtub. In other news, on these oppressively hot days I'm driven to drink; the impulse is escapist, transcendental, and practical. I can walk into a liquor store and buy several hours of obliviousness. I've been drinking Black Velvet whiskey, which is cheap, but there's an elegance to the packaging that gives me confidence — a black label, lettered in gold. I think, without, I hope, degenerating too much towards the maudlin, of all the girls in my past, how I romanticized everything about them, turned them into archetypes, figured out their equations. I wound up spawning empty flasks, blackened but with gold lettering, stitched into poetry journals, libraries, and homes around the world. Yes, where crass hype is concerned, I'm commensurate with the Fugazi Fighters. I'd like to hope that a transcendentalist bent can redeem a he-man's cravings and exploits, but it's not for me to determine.

I can sense how appalled you'd be by Philly, Percy; skyline sunk in summer smog, streets lined with trash reliably as the sun sets, girls that in 2010 no longer think in terms of love, or kisses, or tenderness, but in terms of dalliances with strychnine. I can watch the SEPTA trains, as you know, from my window, and if there is a West Wind pushing them, I don't hear it. All is vacancy here, beneath the surface; all is silence and solitude, disguised by the shrieking noises that might as well be the Fugazi Fighters, who are playing tonight at Johnny Brenda's. Someday, if you're up for a good horror story, I'll tell you about all the shows I used to go to in Philly, even shows I played myself: the mood of conscious and calculated dissipation, the sense of totalized futility, the incredibly acrid taste of a pair of unfamiliar female lips that has a hand on you and a hand on a Heineken. But I'll save that for next time.

Fond Regards,
Adam

Adam Fielded is a poet based in Philadelphia. He has released four print books: "Opera Bufo" (Otoliths, 2007), "When You Bit..." (Otoliths, 2008), "Chimes" (Blazevox, 2009), and "Apparition Poems" (Blazevox, 2010) as well as numerous chapbooks, e-chapbooks, and e-books, including "Posit" (Dusie Press, 2007), "Beams" (Blazevox, 2007), and "The White Album" (ungovernable press, 2009). He has work in journals like Tears in the Fence, Great Works, The Argotist, Mipoesias, Upstairs at Duroc, Jacket, on PennSound, in the &Now Awards Anthology from Lake Forest College Press, and an essay forthcoming in Poetry Salzburg Review from University of Salzburg Press. A magna cum laude graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, he also holds an MFA from New England College and an MA from Temple University, where he is completing his PhD.

Petunia

The kitchen is small and hot.

Even with the windows wide open and the screens knocked out and the fan on HI, it is hard to breathe and Ma is always saying, "It's too hot to be standing over this stove cooking."

She always has sweat on her forehead and on her nose and her hair is always flat. There was a time, though, when she used to have curls in her hair Monday through Sunday – even when she slept. She was always telling me, "Before I met your father, my hair was always curled. Now my hair can't hold no curls 'cause all I do is stand over this hot stove."

And when dad left, the curls came back. The curls swung whenever she turned her head and every chance she got she turned her head. Her hair is what made Mr. Whitson, a local poet, come up to her in Sav-Mor and ask her out. Ma was bending down, looking at the meats – the side of her face hidden by all that hair, all those curls. Before even seeing what Ma looked like, Mr. Whitson tapped her on the shoulder and told her her hair was beautiful. Ma said thank you after she said, "You scared the living daylight's outta me, tapping me on my shoulder like that! Do I know you?"

"You might," Mr. Whitson had said and he told Ma he was a poet and Ma said, "A poet?" like poets were superstars and then told him she never heard of him. Ma went out with him anyway, and she wore her tight dark jeans, a violet blouse and the yellow bracelet that dad gave her. When dad was here she only wore a housecoat. In her jeans and blouse she looked like a young girl on her first date. She made me take a picture and in the kitchen, not hot from cooking, Ma stood, leaning with one hand pressed on the table and the other hand on her hip. I snapped her picture. Her smile was wide. Her smile had the shape of a slice of a delicious watermelon – those were Mr. Whitson's words and then he

MELISSAMCEWEN

wrote them down on a sheet of Ma's paper towel.

"You could be on the cover of a book of poems or the subject of a book of poems. I'd call it Petunia," Mr. Whitson had said. He said that because Ma's violet blouse, tucked in and bloused out, draped over her hips like the petals of a flower. He said that because her hair was full of curls and each curl looked like the petals of a flower and when Mr. Whitson hugged her, he (like a bee) buried his nose in her hair.

He said, "Your hair smells like flowers." And the yellow bracelet on Ma's arm, Mr. Whitson compared to the sweet yellow color of a buttercup. Ma still has the picture in her top drawer – the underlined word "Petunia" scribbled across the back in Mr. Whitson's handwriting and underneath that, a poem Mr. Whitson had thought up right there in the kitchen. And it went on like that for a while until Ma moved him in and now those watermelon-petunia-buttercup days are gone and the curls, too.

Mr. Whitson is no longer a poet, just a man, now, that barks orders like dad used to do before he left (on account of Ma complaining all the time about cooking).

Ma used to always say, "If you love me, you wouldn't make me slave over a hot stove."

Dad used to always say, "If you love me, you would slave over a hot stove."

And on the night before he left he said, "There are plenty of women out there who would love to cook for me!"

He left in the morning without eating his breakfast.

And now Mr. Whitson says the same thing, but sometimes turns back into the poet he once was and compares the sweat on Ma's forehead to dew.

And in the small hot kitchen, Ma's hair just wilts.

Melissa McEwen, author of *Saturday Pie*, has had poems published in *Rattle*, *Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*, *MiPOesias*, and other fine literary journals. Her short story Sarah Nell was featured in *Role Call: A Generational Anthology of Social & Political Black Literature & Art* (Third World Press, 2002).



Don't Blow Your Fuse by Derrick Tyson

47. pa(l)nt(l)gs

to Didi Menéndez

faces painted and painted
faces what you make and
what they make of them-
selves and pigment oil and
water our vanished world
what face we thought we
had or thought we were

the movement of brushes
over the face the motion
of hands of brushes over
the face the swinging of
paint and powders over
the face the face of eyes
and smile the face of red
and pink and brown and
hazel the color of skin the
color of voices coloring words

you see in the eyes what
the eyes see they see you
you see in the eyes what
the eyes see they see
cameras you see in the
eyes what mirrors they
see what hands holding
the mirror the camera
the brush the eye the you
they see the eyes and
yeses and ayes and you
and you see them there too

you can see the paint there
is paint that you can see on
the brush there is paint on
the canvas there is on the
face of the woman the paint
of her face on the face of the
man the colors of his face
as he had imagined them
a red blotch a patch of
baldness bright orange
hair and you can see how
their faces have made them
who they are how their

faces show them where they
are tell them what they can
do determine the life they
lead the sadness in the eyes
that know too much to keep
from washing away the paint
that holds the face in place

where there is skin you lay
a layer of paint where there
is tooth or nail or hair where
there is the eye or the nostril
where there is the hand that
cannot hold a thing you add
paint to make the person as
she is as he is in the painting
with paint with pink with
yellow with orange and blue
there is paint where you
see it there is paint where
you don't their faces are
painted and painted and you
paint what you see until
you see what they who they are

I see every person before me
even when they've come
after me and I'm running
from the painting you made
for the basement the painting
you painted for the wall and
I see the eyes of the people
who once were not even
paintings or thoughts of
paintings I see every person
before me even when they've
come after me and can take
no more I see them in the
paintings of their eyes I see
them in the spaces on the
walls where their families
will hang them I see them
hanging from the walls their
eyes opened and in colors but
floating in a blind pool of white

47. pa(l)nt(l)gs

You see I see you see I'm painting
 I have no paint but paint after
 a long run I am painting everyone
 I have ever seen I paint with my
 fingers I paint with my eyes with
 my hands and my lungs I paint
 with my voice with these words
 with the moving of paint I paint
 every day and every night I paint
 I paint every word you have
 painted tomorrow but I've painted
 no-one and nothing nowhere I've
 painted no person no hand and no
 eye I paint without painting and
 wait without time the space between
 here and now is farther than that

There are no words for painting maybe
 pigment ink canvas covered with color
 augmentation tremolo mulch husk
 aura of a vanished world these words
 are no colors and have no shape beyond
 where they lie and how they are lies
 of the page articles of each not paint
 and eye and I am moving to a place beyond
 meaning but filled with all its trappings

The scope of Geof Huth's poetic production includes handdrawn and computer-generated visual poems (some of them wordless), one-word poems, extemporaneous poems recorded in the act of living, and poems performed in a language that doesn't exist with melodies created as the audience listens. For this year, the year that he is fifty years of age, he is writing each day a poem that is also a letter to someone he knows. He mails each poem out to its intended recipient and posts it to a blog entitled 365 ltrs. He writes almost daily on visual poetry and the textual imagination at his blog, *dbqp: visualizing poetics*. His latest book is *ntst: the collected pwoermds of geof huth*, a book of 775 one-word poems.

ROGER APLON

Arizona

Low clouds close off the sky. A rabbit sniffs the air, abandons his burrow for high ground & a clear view.

A cruising hawk banks to the right, levels off & dives.

Coyotes lurk & plot, their prickly whine echoes down the valley, reverberates against these sandstone walls.

Nothing is safe in this culture of assassins: they fake & dart & charge teeth like needles gnashing.

A Black-tailed rattler stretches, eases down the bank, disappears between rock & sand.

Buzzards have found a dead deer, perch on its putrid hide, gorge on the rot.

Stiff wind from the west. Thunder. A stark & livid gash across the sky.

Under the rain a river where none had run before. Our path is slick. We must learn to tread water – swim or die.

Leaving That Town Behind

The tap-rap-tap of the radiator
squeak of the closing door:

No time left to terminate the mission. Instead,
we toast our love of light & the changing seasons.

She recalls the woman we both knew.
We peel back the map to pinpoint the trail.

After a simple breakfast of tomatoes & cheese
we shake dice for the check & tickets south.

The loser will bear the bags,
the other will sleep in the lower bunk.

At sunset, when the ship has left the quay,
We agree to close her casket.

Roger Aplon has published eight collections of poetry and one of prose. He occasionally reads his work with musicians from the Trummerflora Collective. He has recently been awarded an arts fellowship from the Helene Wurlitzer Foundation in Taos, New Mexico.

SUSIE DEFORD

Searching for Whitman's Beard

Brooklyn's sidewalks are covered with yellow leaves
and squashed stinky Ginko seeds from the "vomit trees."

Another day spent searching for Whitman's beard
on barren streets or a bit of his pen and ink inside me.

Four 'o' clock on the corner of Washington and Sterling,
they're clanking the metal shutters down at Tom's

Restaurant, no more cherry-lime rickeys and smiling
waiters handing out sugar cookies. The sun is dropping

behind the old buildings, I've already been out walking
four hours-hungry, feet ache, shivering. With icicle fingers

I stroke Maggie, she keeps her eyes on the cars whooshing
by until I stop petting, pocketing my hands for warming.

She flips her nose up, an upside-down possum peering
at me insisting my hurting hands will be warmer scratching

in her tangles of thick black fur. But I am ice, I pity-sing,
no one will read my words, I am nothing for the game

playing. Maggie grunts and groans impatiently back at me.
She pulls to sniff bare trees, soon again come green leaves.

Susie DeFord studied poetry at Florida State University, and received her MFA from the New School University. Her work has appeared in *BOMB*, *Poets and Artists*, *Work Zine*, *Pyramid Magazine*, *The Comstock Review*, *Poetry Motel*, *Survivor Magazine*, *Architrave*, and *Pinyon*. She won the Cody Harris Allen Writing Award and was a finalist in the Muriel Craft Poetry Award and the New Letters Poetry Prize. She has taught writing at Brooklyn Friends School, Berkeley Carroll, and the College of New Rochelle. Also a musician, she fronted the bands [Terset](#) and [Wu Wei](#). She lives in Brooklyn, where she runs [Susie's Pet Care](#), a dog walking business and writes the blog [Dog Poet Laureate](#). Susie also writes the poetry column subTEXT for [BOMB magazine](#). She is currently seeking a publisher for her first book of poems and photographs by Dennis Riley called *The Dogs of Brooklyn* (c.2007-2009).



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FICTION

Almard's The Indian Scout

Mural

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